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Research Article

Practice and Practices: Three adult literacy learners' interactions with text in daily life

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Abstract

A clear relationship between reading practice and reading achievement has been established for young developing readers. Yet, little is known about what adult developing readers participating in adult basic education programs understand and do to improve their reading outside of class. Given that they often have relatively little time in class to practice reading, addressing this question is particularly important to support reading skill development. This case study of three adult learners' interactions with text outside of class indicates that their motivation and capacity to practice reading is influenced not only by demographic characteristics such as age, gender, occupation, and educational level, but also by their adult roles, their beliefs about how to improve their reading skills, and the role of literacy "sponsors" (Brandt, 2001). This cross-case analysis points to the importance of teachers explicitly and strategically encouraging and supporting out-of-class reading for adult literacy learners.

It takes many hours of instruction and practice for adults with low literacy skills to increase their chances of making significant reading progress. For example, Comings et al. (2000) found it took 150-175 hours of instruction for 75% of students to make a grade level gain. Miller and Johnson (2020) found that the odds of increasing skills by one educational functioning level (indicating progress in either reading or math) increased by 77% if they participated in a class for at least 100 hours. Yet, adults who enroll in adult basic education (ABE) programs may have as little as 3 hours of instruction per week. Programs that provide more instructional hours often focus on developing a diverse set of skills that might only tangentially include reading. Direct reading instruction and time spent on reading practice may make up a relatively small fraction of instructional time. Even when reading is taught more intensively, there may be little time left over to practice reading connected and extended texts during class time.

Thus, outside of classroom reading practices may be critical to their success. Because of the importance of reading practice(s) and limited opportunities to spend time reading during class, the purpose of this study was to understand more about learners' interactions with text outside of class time. Descriptions that capture adult literacy learners' practice(s) can help practitioners clarify their role in strengthening the relationship between in-class learning and day-to-day literacy practice(s).

The study was guided by two intersecting concepts using nearly the same word but representing different perspectives: reading practice and reading practices. From a learning perspective, *practice* means doing something repetitively and deliberately to develop new skills and understandings (Ericsson, et al., 1993). Here, the assumption is that reading more, especially with engagement and intentionality, can lead to reading better. From a sociocultural perspective, literacy *practices* "are the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives... [They] are what people do with literacy...[and] involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships"

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(Barton, 2007, p. 15). Thus, engaging in literacy activities in day-to-day life is mutually reinforced interaction between practice and practices. For this paper, these two concepts will be shown as interrelated by combining them as practice(s) on the assumption that both contribute to how and what learners choose to read in their daily lives and what assumptions they have about reading and how to improve their reading skill.

Many adults with low literacy skills carry narrow school-like conceptions of literacy, low self-confidence, and high levels of doubt regarding their reading skills. These are often shaped by powerful messages conveyed during years spent in primary and secondary school (Benson, 2010; Compton-Lilly, 2009; Rogers, 2004) and may curtail motivation to engage with text voluntarily. Yet, researchers find that reading identity is malleable. This suggests that practitioners can help learners reconstruct their literate identities in ways that change their relationship to reading practice(s) (Hall, 2020). An important first step in understanding how to do this is learning more about the day-to-day literacy interactions adult learners have with text as well as how they understand the role of practice(s) in their literacy development. While other studies have documented literacy practices of adults with low skills, they have done so for other purposes (e.g. Barton, 2007).

Documenting these interactions addressed the following research questions: What reading practice do these adult developing readers engage in purposefully and incidentally outside of class? What factors influence these activities? What supports and inhibits their desire and ability to practice reading outside of class? Addressing these questions can contribute to an enriched understanding of appropriate instructional strategies to support increased outside reading practice(s) that is informed by, and responsive to, the realities of adult learners' day-to-day lives and experiences.

The intersection of Practice, Practices, and Motivation

It is a truism that practice makes perfect, and much research has been conducted to demonstrate its applicability to reading achievement. Reading more is repeatedly correlated with improvement in a range of reading component skills and overall reading achievement (Allington, et al., 2021; Cipielewski, et al., 1992; Krashen, 2004; Mackenzie, 2025; Sparks, et al., 2014). However, these benefits are not automatically accrued; they depend on quantity of time spent reading, number of texts read (Allington, 2014; Sparks et al., 2014), quality of engagement (Ericsson, et al., 2019; Topping, et al., 2007) and the type of texts encountered or sought out (Anderson et al., 1988). Correlational studies make it impossible to know the causal relationship between reading practice and reading proficiency. However, Cunningham et al. (2011, as cited in Sparks et al., 2014) argued that various quantitative analysis strategies "[make a strong case for the] reciprocal nature of strong reading skills...and engagement in reading" (p. 209) suggesting a meaningful interrelationship.

Research has also demonstrated a relationship between adult reader characteristics and engagement with text (Purcell-Gates, et al., 2002; Smith, 2000; Smith, et al., 1999). Additionally, Smith (1999) and Mellard et al. (2007) demonstrated a correlation between reading practices and reading proficiency in adults. Smith analyzed data on adults across proficiency levels; Mellard et al. focused on low-skilled adult learners. Although Smith explains that cognitive psychology research demonstrates a relationship between practice and performance, practitioners know that adult responsibilities due to family, work, and community involvement as well as access to reading materials play a role in whether ABE participants practice newly acquired skills outside the classroom. Similarly, Mellard et al. (2007) found that "multiple personal and contextual dimensions influence adults' reading behaviors" (p. 207) including age, employment status, educational attainment level, and gender. A practices perspective suggests that values and cultural assumptions also play a role.

Based on findings from the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL), Reder (2009) found "there is...a strong chain of evidence linking program [participation] to increased engagement in [literacy] practices and linking practice engagement over longer periods of time to increased proficiency levels" (p. 47). Reder's Practice Engagement Theory (Reder, et al., 2020) asserts "that frequent engagement in reading, writing and math activities [in everyday life] fosters the growth of underlying literacy and numeracy proficiency" (p. 269). This creates a virtuous cycle by which literacy practice

contributes to proficiency, and proficiency contributes to increased practice (Reder, 2009)

Literacy ethnographers, who tend to study literacy use in a variety of contexts, focus on the ways that individuals interact with text and the social and cultural contexts that shape these interactions. Barton and Hamilton (2000) and Street (2003) have differentiated between the observable patterns of activity in which texts play a central role (literacy events) and the more conceptual notion of literacy practices which are enacted during literacy events and reflect "the broader cultural conceptions of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts" (Street, 2003, p. 79). Studies that focus on literacy practices as defined by these researchers "underscore the fact that reading and writing serve many functions, appear in many places, take many forms. They demonstrate how people achieve literacy by various avenues, how reading and writing and learning about them go on in many contexts beyond formal schooling, and often hand in hand with other cultural activities" (Brandt, 2001, p. 7).

These kinds of studies led to detailed descriptions and analyses of how, why, with whom, and under what circumstances adults read, uncovering the multiple ways reading is shaped by social contexts that were seminal and have continued to shape literacy research since then (Barton, et al., 1998; Neilsen, 1989; Taylor, et al., 1988). This ethnographic work, although dated and not designed as such, helps explain the readership research because it demonstrates the ways in which socio-cultural contexts influence the quantity and quality of reading events in which adults engage. Additionally, it highlights the complex and varied ways there are to read, as well as the ways race, class, gender, and other positionalities influence how texts are used and understood. However, this work does not explicitly consider the choices adults with low literacy skills make around engagement with text as a way to improve their literacy skills.

Motivation can play an important role in explaining reading practice(s). Studies on children have found that access to a wide range of texts and print exposure, the capacity to continue reading when difficulty is encountered, reading self-efficacy, and a positive attitude about the value of reading can encourage more reading practice (Gambrell, 2011; Mackenzie, 2025; McQuillan, et al., 2001; Schraw, et al., 1999; Sparks et al., 2014; Wigfield, et al., 1997). Self-report studies have documented similar relationships among adults (Mellard et al., 2007; Smith, 1996). However, adults participating in ABE programs increase their literacy practices when taught using authentic texts and tasks (Purcell-Gates et al., 2002; Shore, et al., 2013) and when given access to an extensive library and opportunities and encouragement to engage in extensive reading during class time (Rodrigo, et al., 2014). Guthrie and Wigfield (1999) note that having task mastery goals, intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, personal interactions, and transactional beliefs also play an important role in reading motivation.

Negative feelings about reading can shape and be shaped by reading identity (how individuals describe themselves as readers) which often gets established in school (Benson, 2010; Compton-Lilly, 2009). Benson (2010), for example, found that school experiences had an abiding impact on perception of literacy ability and ideas about literacy and learning more generally. This is consequential for those who struggled to gain literacy skills as children because "when school becomes the only lens through which literacy is viewed, adults can easily see themselves as lacking" (Benson, 2010, p. 139). Rogers (2004), identified a different way of understanding the impact of reading identity which she describes as domain specific and sometimes conflicting. This is especially salient when it comes to conceptions of reading and reading practices in daily life. Adults in her study saw school reading as distinct from engagement in daily reading tasks and generally assessed their reading skills/identity through a school lens. This suggests that adult literacy learners may need support to broaden their concept of literacy practice(s).

Those adults who define literacy largely as school-literacy and who have a negative self-identity in relation to that definition could experience diminished motivation to engage with avoidable literacy interactions. Fortunately, researchers have found reading identity to be malleable (Compton-Lilly, 2009; Glenn, et al., 2018; Hall, 2020; Saal, et al., 2014). Brandt's (2001) work suggests that adult educators acting as "literacy sponsors" — those influencers who shape perspectives on literacy — can play an important role in revising literacy identity (Compton-Lilly, 2009; Glenn et al., 2009) and helping adults seeking to develop their literacy skills gain a greater sense of efficacy and motivation.

Expectancy-value theory (EVT) (Wigfield, et al., 2017) might be a particularly helpful way to understand reading motivation in adults who face the double challenge of negative reading identity and limited time to focus on reading practice(s) outside the literacy classroom. EVT posits that learners consciously or unconsciously make choices about engaging in learning tasks based on assessment of likely success (i.e. expectancies) and the value and costs of doing so. As part of this process, learners evaluate psychological, emotional, and social costs associated with the tasks. If they are too high, the task will not be undertaken, especially when there is also a fear of failure which may be tied up with school-formulated reading identities (Wigfield et al., 2017). Importantly, researchers have found that expectancy and values, like identity, are malleable; they can be influenced by interventions in the classroom (Wigfield et al., 2017). The research on EVT shows promise both for understanding what might be at play when adult literacy learners make choices about spending time reading outside of class and pointing to specific strategies instructors could use to motivate learners to read more.

Taken together, research on reading practice(s) and motivation provided the lens for collecting and analyzing data for this study. It shaped the assumption that it is useful to understand both the way reading practice is implemented and the beliefs and values (practices) brought to the task. Lytle and Schultz (1991 as cited in Benson, 2010) make this argument well: "We need to find ways to comprehend more fully and with a critical perspective adult learners' own images, practices, plans, and perceptions of literacy..." (p. 132). There is little prior research on the ways adult literacy learners use literacy, purposefully or not, to practice their literacy skills outside the classroom.

Research Design

This study drew on self-report, interview, and observational data to learn more about how reading practices and reading practice intersect for three adults enrolled in an ABE program. They were participating in a large, urban, program offering classes from beginning literacy to adult high school, workforce development, and ESL. Although Edna and Juan are bilingual and Edna's first language is Spanish, they were not in ESL classes. They were selected by recommendation from their teachers based on the duration and consistency of their participation in the program, their potential to be reflective and communicative, and their willingness to participate for which they received $100.

We conducted three types of observations: (a) classroom observation, (b) shadowing (McDonald, 2005), and (c) self-report logs. The intent of observing in these ways was to capture as naturalistic a picture of participants' reading practice(s) as possible by having the researcher spend time with them and by having them self-document their activities.

During the classroom observation, we noted what the participants read, with whom, and how. We spent 6-13 hours shadowing each participant during the course of one day to document a "typical day" of text interactions. While shadowing the participants, we also conducted informal interviews to understand their beliefs, values, and intentions regarding observed literacy practices and to understand how typical they were. Additionally, the participants observed their own text interactions by talking into an audio recorder at several points during another day to further document their practice(s). They described what and how they read, where, with whom, why they did so, and how they felt about the activity.

We also conducted three interviews centered on each participant: (a) one teacher interview and (b) a preliminary and (c) a debriefing participant interview. The preliminary interview focused on learning about reading goals and needs, typical interactions with text, and beliefs and practices regarding improving reading. The debriefing interview (for which Juan was not available) was an opportunity to clarify and discuss areas of interest that arose during data collection.

Although length of data collection activities was relatively short, our multiple sources enabled us to triangulate (Merriam, 1998) the data and gave us confidence that the case descriptions we composed of the participants' interactions with text were reasonably authentic portrayals of their actual day-to-day reading lives.

As a first step in the analysis process, all observation field notes, interview transcripts, and audio log transcripts were read and annotated with preliminary codes and researcher notes. A description of each case (participant) was then

developed which provided "a detailed view ...[of] the 'facts'" (Creswell, 2007, p. 163). To conduct a cross-case analysis, these descriptions were compared along a number of dimensions including the types of texts the participants encountered in their day-to-day lives; the kinds of reading tasks they engaged in to address their adult roles and responsibilities; and their attitudes and beliefs about reading, learning to read, and practicing reading. In addition, the kinds of contexts in which interactions with text took place were noted. As part of this process, we used categorical aggregation (Stake, 1995) to identify similar instances of interaction with texts across cases and the "constant comparative" (Strauss, et al., 1990) method to examine the cases against each other.

Outside of School Practices

Edna, Juan, and Margaret did not have access to a classroom library, nor were they particularly encouraged by their teachers to read outside of class. In other words, their program experience did not prompt or explicitly seek to increase reading practice(s) or seek to understand their practice(s). Yet, each interacted with text in their day-to-day lives. The case studies below describe these interactions.

Edna

Edna was enrolled in adult high school classes and was the most proficient reader[1] of the three participants. She was 54 at the time of the study, married, and a mother of five adult children. She was born in Guatemala and came to the US at about age 16. Literate in Spanish, she earned her GED in English when her children were young. She has recently returned to school to improve her skills after being laid off from an air conditioning factory where she worked for 24 years.

Outside of school she likes to read in both English and Spanish and does so daily. Edna reported that she reads the local newspaper, the Bible, and other religious texts several times a week. She also reads magazines that her daughters share with her, or she finds in doctors' offices, if they look interesting. She scans headlines and a Guatemalan newspaper on her computer. Additionally, she spends much of whatever spare time she has between household chores working in reading, writing and grammar, and math workbooks (not assigned as homework) and completing homework worksheet packets.

Edna feels her skills have improved since enrolling in the program and attributes this to doing school-like work at home and the support of her teachers. She also credits being able to ask her daughters and a family friend for help. Edna believes that reading books would help her improve her skills, but she does not do this often. She expressed interest in getting a library card to borrow books that are "stories about people." However, due to what she called "difficulties," she has not actually done this.

Quite a bit of text is visible in Edna's house including mail and newspapers sitting on her dining room table; books on the desk and shelves in her computer room; notices, coupons, and recipes stuck to her refrigerator door with magnets; and a framed passage hanging on the wall entitled "The Unknown Guest" (referring to God). On the day we spent observing her, Edna went to class, the grocery store, the bank, and then returned home. She was surrounded by texts in all these places and seemed to interact comfortably and fluently with them. For example, at the grocery store, she compared labels looking for specific ingredients; at the bank she filled out a deposit slip without hesitation. When friends from church came in the evening to worship together, their collaborative Bible reading and discussion affirmed our observation that reading is fully integrated in Edna's day-to-day life.

Juan

Juan was in an intermediate level class. At the time we collected data, he was 21 with two-and-a-half-year-old twins who were living in another city with their mother. Juan lived with his mother. He was born in the U.S. but had spent extended periods living in Puerto Rico with his father. He described himself as bilingual in English and Spanish. After a serious car accident at age seven, Juan reported that he was always in trouble at school. He was sent to a disciplinary high school and dropped out at age 16. He then spent five years living in Puerto Rico with his father. Soon after he returned, he decided to return to school.

1 We did not collect NRS levels or assessment information. Our understanding of level was determined by program class assignment.

Juan reported that, outside of school, "Sometimes I write; I don't hardly read." He is not assigned any homework and does no schoolwork at home. He reads in school because that is expected, but "when I'm home, that's my freedom, and I do what I want." When the program's counselor offered him books to read over the summer break, he refused them saying, "I've done enough. I don't want to read no more." When asked why he does not read, he said, "It's 'cause I got things I got to do." He also explained that reading just "doesn't attract my attention...I look for something...that's more comfortable for me."

Juan measured his progress since starting school by how many pages in his school workbooks he had completed. He could not identify anything that he could do to make himself a better reader other than completing assignments at school. He does this only halfheartedly, admitting that he often rushes through the tasks his teacher gives him and answers multiple choice questions without thoroughly reading the passages to which they refer. His teacher described him as a "restless reader" who always chooses to read the shortest things possible. She said, "If it's not for some purpose that he's comfortable with or happy with, he won't read it. Anything... that's more than 3 or 4 pages—he gets very bored with."

Unemployed, Juan's days are somewhat unstructured, although he described himself as the person everyone in his family counts on to help with whatever is needed. Although we spent many hours with him, Juan did not take us through a typical day, and he did not invite us into his home. Based on our discussions and his self-report and given the parameters of his life, however, it seems he generally avoids interacting with text. He could do this because he seemed to operate in a world devoid of reading demands. He does not drive, work, have a bank account, or grocery shop. He reported that there are no books or magazines in his home.

Margaret

Margaret, who was participating in the most basic level reading class at the program, was a 42-year-old African American woman who had worked as a presser at a dry cleaner but was unemployed at the time of the study. She was pregnant and had a 10 ½ year old daughter who lived with her grandmother but visited Margaret on the weekends. She lived with her fiancé in a two-story townhouse. Margaret dropped out of high school, at age 18, just weeks short of graduation, when her father kicked her out of the house. She reported that school had been hard for her. Her goals for enrolling in the ABE program were to gain closure and to do what she felt was best for her and her daughter. "I want to get something for my life, for my daughter; and so she can get an education, and I can get a education, and we can learn something together. That is the best thing for my daughter, for me." Margaret felt she had improved her reading skills and her confidence. She asserted that the main ingredient in accomplishing this is spending time in school. When asked if there was anything she could do outside of school to help herself, she said, "not right now."

On a typical day, Margaret rode the bus or took a cab to school if she could afford it; otherwise, she stayed home. When she could attend, she went straight home afterwards. She reported that at home, she looks at her mail and newspapers and reads text she sees on the always turned on TV. She reads the Bible and other religious materials and directions and recipes on food boxes. She gets no homework assignments and does no schoolwork at home. When she has difficulty decoding something, she seeks help from her fiancé. He often reads the newspaper aloud to her. Her main outing is to go grocery shopping. There, she says, "I have to read stuff... to buy something because I might buy the wrong thing [otherwise]." Because she spends a lot of time at home, her interactions with text outside of school are mostly limited to anything with print that is in, or comes to, her house. However, there is little print material there, and the time she spends engaged with it is limited.

The Relationship Between Reading Practices and Reading Practice

Given the research on the relationship between reader characteristics and "readership," it is expected that the three research participants practices vary. Research indicates that their different ages, occupational experiences, parenting responsibilities, reading abilities, and other characteristics play a role in these differences. At one end of the spectrum, Edna reads a range of texts every day. She reads to fulfill her adult responsibilities, to stay informed, for spiritual reasons, and to do additional, voluntary school-like work. At the other end of the spectrum, Juan finds little reason, outside of class, to

read at all. Margaret, the most struggling reader of the three, seems to use reading more in her day-to-day life than Juan. Although isolated, with little access to print, she does read some every day. However, the differences in their reading behaviors seem shaped by factors beyond demographic characteristics or reading levels. In our cross-case discussion, we focus on how their roles as adults, their beliefs about reading improvement, and "literacy sponsors" (Brandt, 2001) shape their reading practice(s).

Influences of adult roles on reading practice

The roles that Edna and Margaret fulfilled as adult members of their families and communities had a clear impact on what they read as well as where and with whom they did it, creating unplanned opportunities to read through day-to-day interactions with text. For example, because Edna was responsible for food shopping and banking, she regularly interacted with texts in the world of commerce. Margaret had some similar responsibilities, but in a more limited way. By virtue of their adultness, they received and read mail. They read religious texts because of their faith. They also sought information through newspapers, dictionaries, TV, and the Internet. There was some text in their homes, and they could read there as well as in stores and banks. In contrast, Juan seemed to be in a sort of twilight between adolescence and adulthood, with few real responsibilities. His position limited his exposure to many kinds of text that Margaret and Edna encountered regularly. Even though he was able to read, he rarely needed to and never chose to.

Edna, Juan, and Margaret demonstrate that adulthood may create incidental opportunities to read that could easily be turned into purposeful opportunities to practice, but it can also interfere. For example, Edna made clear that were it not for her adult worries and responsibilities, she would probably read more. None of the research participants were directly responsible for the care of school-aged children, but it is likely that parenting responsibilities would add additional interactions with text that could be a source of reading practice as well as time demands that might detract from reading practice(s).

Beliefs about how to improve reading

The amount of time that the participants spent reading seems tied to their beliefs about the value of investing time in this activity. While adultness seems naturally to create incidental interactions with text for Edna and Margaret, these interactions were not necessarily construed or constructed as opportunities to practice reading. Yet it is in the deliberateness of practice that real improvement can accrue (Ericsson et al., 1993). For all three, school experiences and school literacy held a powerful grip on their understanding of reading practice(s). Indeed, Edna and Margaret expressed their belief that the only reading that could improve their skills was school-related reading. Margaret felt that the only place she could do this kind of reading was in school, and Juan seemed to feel that the reading he did in school was adequate for reaching his goals. All three participants seemed to share the assumption that doing traditional school reading tasks (e.g., reading short passages and answering comprehension questions) in school or at home, is the main route to improved reading in general. Even Edna, who said she believed she should read more books, put her considerable effort primarily into completing workbook pages rather than engaging in more authentic reading tasks as a purposeful way to improve. When asked what she could do to help herself improve her skills, she replied, "If I do my homework, I will be better in everything that I want to do. If I come to school, and I don't do my homework, I would never learn."

Of course, Margaret and Edna did do some reading for pleasure, information, or to get things done in their day-to-day lives because of their adult responsibilities and commitments. However, they separated reading that they had to or chose to do from reading to improve their skills and did not perceive the former as opportunities to practice. Rather, these three adults' understandings of what they could and should do to improve their reading seem largely shaped by "powerful, not always helpful, messages about reading from their years in school" (Belzer, 2002,, p. 111). Thus, their own notions of reading, shaped by their experiences and contexts, seem to work against the likelihood of their engaging in purposeful, extensive reading practice outside of class. The motivation to practice reading as a way to improve skills must be preceded by a belief that practice can help. Only Edna seemed to understand this, but all were limited by a very narrow view of reading practice(s).

The role of "literacy sponsors"

Brandt (2001) defines literacy sponsors as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy... (p. 19). While the sponsoring role of teachers and parents is often assumed to be significant in the development of literacy skills for children (Baker, et al., 1997; Topping et al., 2007), Edna, Juan, and Margaret's daily interactions with text also demonstrate this same kind of important sponsoring role that teachers and relatives play in shaping their interactions with text. For example, because both Edna and Margaret had benefit of reading help from family members, they could regularly interact with texts that may have been too challenging to undertake by themselves. Edna gave several examples of her family's support and involvement in her reading development and learning more generally, including that her daughters gave her an electronic dictionary as a gift, help her with schoolwork when she needs it, and recognize and exclaim over her progress. Her husband bought her a math workbook.

In contrast, Margaret and Juan have little support or encouragement for their efforts. They both seem to be working against a negative self-image of themselves as learners that they report was planted by their fathers. Although Margaret's fiancé sometimes acts as a literacy "assistant" by reading the newspaper to her and helping her with personal business, she did not report any involvement on his part in her learning. Similarly, though his teacher reported that Juan's mother frequently checked up on his attendance when he first came to the program, she seemed to pay no attention to the work that he was doing or his progress while he was there. Neither Margaret nor Juan had the positive literacy sponsors that Edna enjoyed. While all three reported positive relationships with their teachers, who presumably functioned as literacy sponsors within the program, there was little evidence that they made any explicit effort to encourage reading practice outside of school and largely focused on providing access to just one kind of text in school--instructional texts.

Discussion: Implications for Practice

Because research suggests that reading identity is malleable and that reading identity and practice(s) are connected, teachers can function not just as instructors but as literacy sponsors (Brandt, 2001) who play an important role in encouraging learners to see themselves as readers who have agency in improving their own reading skills through increased reading practice(s). This is especially relevant if, like Edna, Juan, and Margaret, learners have negative feelings about reading and low motivation to engage in practice(s) or see reading improvement as tied only to school-like reading activities. Specifically, they can increase both expectancy and value (EVT) regarding reading practice(s) by helping learners understand its importance, building their expectations and strategies for success, increasing access to text and understanding appropriate text selection (with regard to difficulty level), and overcoming barriers to reading practice(s). Although how instructors enact these recommendations needs to be adjusted to learners' reading strengths and challenges, the overall goal of encouraging learners to engage in more reading practice(s) should be the same regardless of reading level and potential or diagnosed learning disability.

To varying degrees each of the focal adults in this study spent some time reading outside of class, but none of them indicated that they understood this as a way of improving their reading skills. Their reading beliefs and practices seemed to limit their reading practice. They, and probably other adult learners like them, could benefit if teachers explicitly encouraged reading outside of class. They can do this by explaining the relationship between reading more and skill development, making clear the importance of reading widely from a range of texts and for a range of purposes, and clarifying that school-like reading tasks can be helpful but all kinds of reading support their progress.

Understanding the "pay off" of engaging in varied reading practice(s) is an important motivational ingredient according to expectancy-value theory (EVT) (Wigfield et al., 2017). One strategy that may be helpful in conveying the importance of reading in support of reading motivation and to increase reading time is keeping a reading log. Earl (1997) implemented several strategies to increase the time her students spent reading, but experienced only limited success until she asked them to use a reading log. This not only seemed to serve as a reminder to read but also conveyed a strong and clear message about the importance of reading outside of class and provided a

structure for tracking reading engagement. In addition, as the students read more, they talked to each other about what they were reading. Although teachers cannot hope to change the culture of support for learners in their homes (for better or worse), Earl provides an example of how to create peer literacy sponsors by building interested and supportive networks of learners who share and discuss their reading likes and dislikes, triumphs, and challenges. This may help adults over the hump when their spouses, partners, or children are unable, unwilling, or unaware of the importance of doing so.

EVT also suggests the importance of working to raise learners' expectations for success. To accomplish this, learners may need ways to revisit, revise, and "restory" (Clark, et al., 2008) their beliefs about reading and themselves as readers. This involves reflection and analysis of past and current reading experiences in and out of school in ways that increase self-efficacy and release negative self-blame. To experience success, they may also need to learn how to identify texts at an appropriate level of challenge to avoid frustration. Additionally, learners need explicit strategies that enable them to keep reading without barriers. This includes knowing how to and being encouraged explicitly to deploy decoding and comprehension strategies that they are learning in class. "Positive experiences with texts... over time...[can] create new histories, identities, and habits" (Hall, 2020, p. 681). The idea here is that when learners are invited to (re)construct a positive sense of self and gain positive reading experiences, motivation to engage with text increases.

Even with the best of intentions, learners may have difficulty spending time reading a range of text because of poor access and other barriers. An important starting point for increasing access to text and simultaneously communicating the importance of reading outside of class could be providing a classroom or program library with a range of books, magazines, and other print materials in a variety of genres and difficulty levels from which students can borrow to read at home. AI may be helpful in generating or modifying texts at varying levels of difficulty. Beers (1996) points out that choice of texts is important, but that it should be limited so as not to overwhelm. She also suggests that uncommitted or unmotivated readers may prefer non-fiction and need a lot of visual cues in the text to help them picture what they are reading about. Ensuring that classroom texts are not only engaging but relevant and connected to learners' daily lives can also increase interest in reading and help learners see the connection between school literacy and daily life (Mellard, et al., 2007; Noreen, et al., 2025).

Even with the most effective instructional strategies along with high-quality motivation, learners' busy lives may leave them feeling they do not have the time to read. To address this reality, teachers could help learners understand that even short bursts of regular reading could be helpful. A class activity could involve learners collaboratively identifying ways to find such opportunities several times each week. Periodic discussions about how they are (or are not) finding time to read could also offer helpful input and new ideas.

Conclusion

Although an important first step, simply telling adult students that they should read more is probably not enough. The sample size here, limited by resources, is small enabling only an exploratory inquiry, and no generalizations can be made. However, Edna, Juan, and Margaret's stories are illustrative of important implications for practice that may be appropriate for many adult literacy learners. They suggest that educators may need to help adult learners re-evaluate their beliefs, values, and goals regarding reading to encourage reading practice(s). This may be especially true if belief systems are bound by images of school-like reading which may inhibit motivation and the range and quality of interactions with texts outside of the classroom. Teachers can also emphasize and maximize the conditions that can support increased reading practice. It may seem like a simple idea to argue that adult struggling readers need encouragement and help to read more as an important part of becoming fluent and capable readers. The data presented here, however, suggest that learners' understanding of this or their capacity to act on it cannot be taken for granted cannot be taken for granted. Adult learners can do a great deal to help themselves improve their reading, but they may need substantive help from others to get started so that they can change their reading practice(s) and amplify the outcomes of participating in adult education.

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